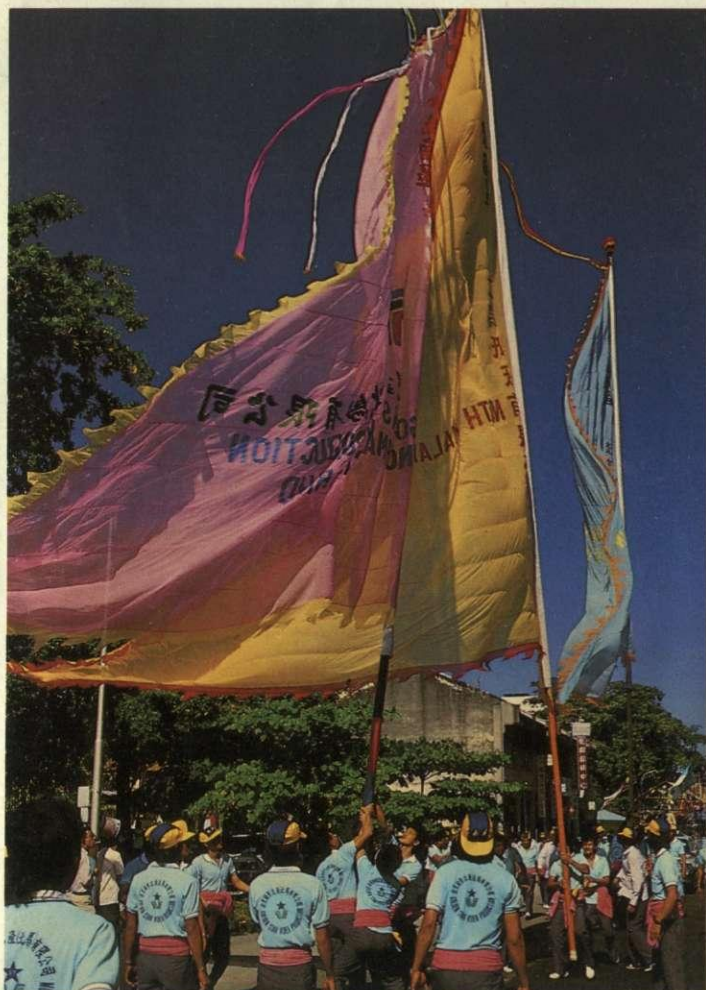


PENANG

LAND OF

FESTIVALS



Chingay flags flapping in the wind.

David Chew

I

NTRODUCTION

'Variety is the spice of life' — as the saying goes, and it aptly describes the essence of Penang.

The island, popularly known as 'The Pearl of the Orient', thrives on many a salient facet that captivates, and enhances her natural charms — much to the delight of visitors and locals alike.

Particularly fascinating is her kaleidoscope of festivals which reflect the cultural diversity of Penang's multi-racial society.

Preserving at all times, the traditions and culture peculiar to each race — the Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians and other ethnic groups, visitors are provided with a golden opportunity to experience the richness, fervour and frolic of feasts and festivals of Malaysia — all on one island.

Locally referred to as 'perayaan', these festivals mostly originate from practices of religious significance. They vary in dates from year to year according to the Muslim, Tamil or Chinese Lunar calendars.

While festive days are spent in religious observance for some, colourful celebrations throw the general leisurely pace of Penangites into an organised chaos. But gaeity abounds.

Processions, water sports, parades, cultural and stage shows are common highlights of these celebrations.

The uniqueness of these festivals is not only in their observance but in their national celebration. Enjoyed and celebrated by all — regardless of race and creed, the customary practice of having an "open house" goes down well with well-wishers where traditional food and gracious hospitality are the order of the day.

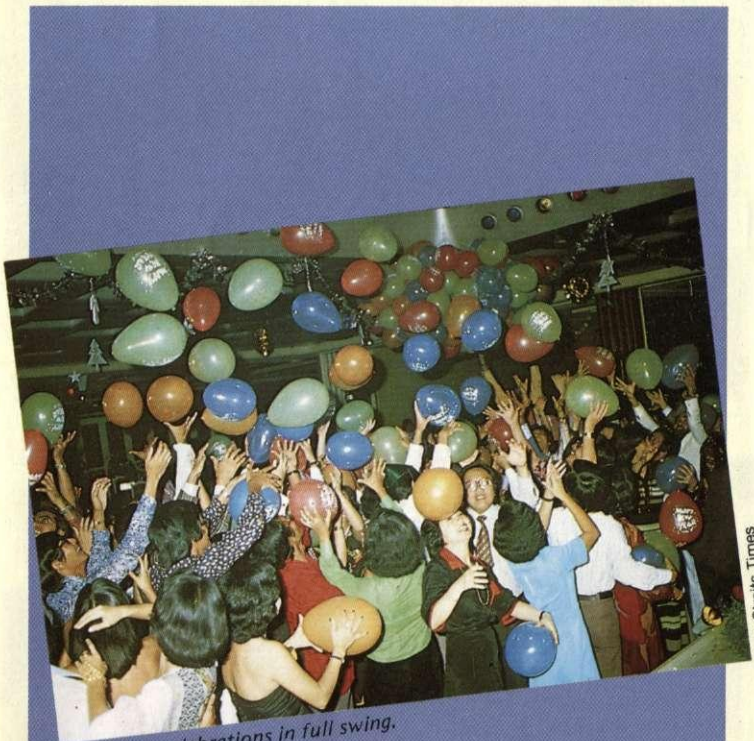
NEW YEAR'S DAY

1st January

National public holiday.

It is perhaps the most widely celebrated festivity in Penang.

Revellers converge at nightspots and public places are teemed with people on New Year's Eve. Even ships in the harbour join in the uproarious ushering in of the New Year.



New Year celebrations in full swing.

New Straits Times

THAIPUSAM

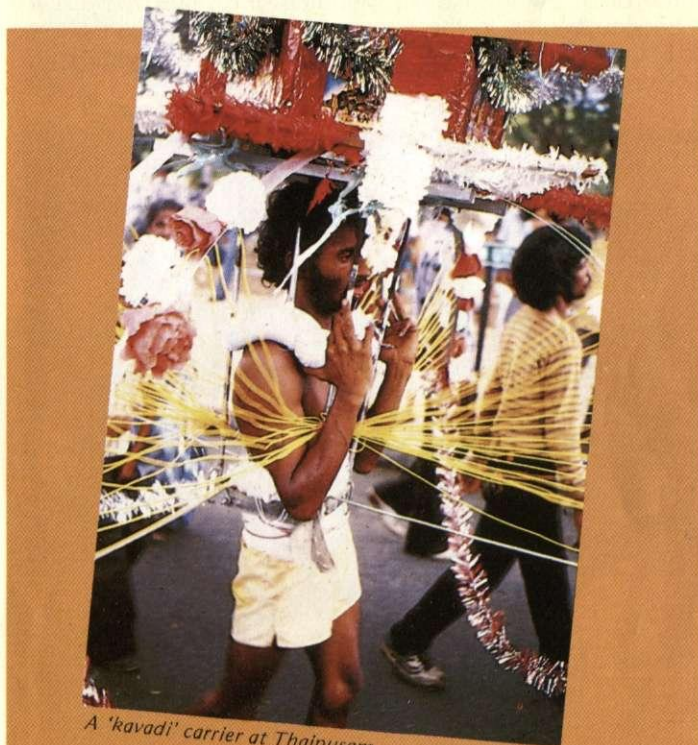
February

State public holiday.

Celebrated by Hindus to mark the victory of Lord Subramaniam, also known as Lord Murugar, over the demons and is symbolic of the triumph of good over evil.

The festival begins with a grand procession of the silver chariot bearing the jewel-studded statue of Lord Subramaniam from the Sri Mariamman Temple in Lebu Queen to the Nattukkottai Temple in Waterfall Road. It is a day of penance and thanksgiving for blessings received. Devotees carry "kavadis" (steel arches with long spikes and metal hooks that pierce the flesh) to fulfill their vows and some dance their way barefooted along the routes. Sacrifices such as milk, honey and fruits, among other things are transported on "kavadis" and presented at Lord Subramaniam's shrine.

The procession passes through Jalan Dato Keramat and Jalan Utama before ending at the Nattukkottai Temple.



A 'kavadi' carrier at Thaipusam.

CHINESE NEW YEAR

Normally falls in the months of January or February

National public holiday.

The most important event in the Chinese festive calendar, Chinese New Year falls on the first day of the first moon in the Chinese lunar calendar. On the eve of this day, Chinese families hold reunion dinners to usher in the New Year.

The first two days are spent paying respects to the elders, visiting relatives (visits to relatives follow a traditional order of priority) and friends. Engaged in the age-old tradition, "ang pows" (red packets containing money) are given to children and unmarried adults. Adding to the festive atmosphere, lion dances are held where acrobats demonstrate skills in collecting "ang pows" amidst the clashing of cymbals and beating of gongs and drums.

During the fifteen days of Chinese New Year, the "open house" concept is practised whereby Malaysians of all races visit the homes of their Chinese friends.



Fire-crackers and the colour red symbolises good luck at Chinese New Year.

CHOR SOO KONG'S BIRTHDAY

Celebrated thrice a year being the 6th day of the 1st, 6th and 11th moons in the Chinese lunar calendar.

Observed on the 6th day of the New Year, devotees congregate at the Snake Temple to offer prayers and gifts to the deity Chor Soo Kong. It is said that the snake population at the temple is most numerous at this time. A Chinese 'wayang' (opera) is also staged in front of the temple.



Devotees offering prayers at the Snake Temple.

David Chew

BIRTHDAY OF THE JADE EMPEROR (GOD OF HEAVEN)

Falls in February

This auspicious occasion corresponds with the 9th day of the Chinese New Year. On the night before, offerings such as whole roasted pigs, food and fruits are laid out on raised altars outside most Chinese homes after 11.00 p.m. for the Jade Emperor.

During the day, devotees offer prayers and offerings at the Temple of Heaven near the foot of the Penang Hill Railway in Air Itam.

BIRTHDAY OF THE GOD OF PROSPERITY (TUA PEH KONG)

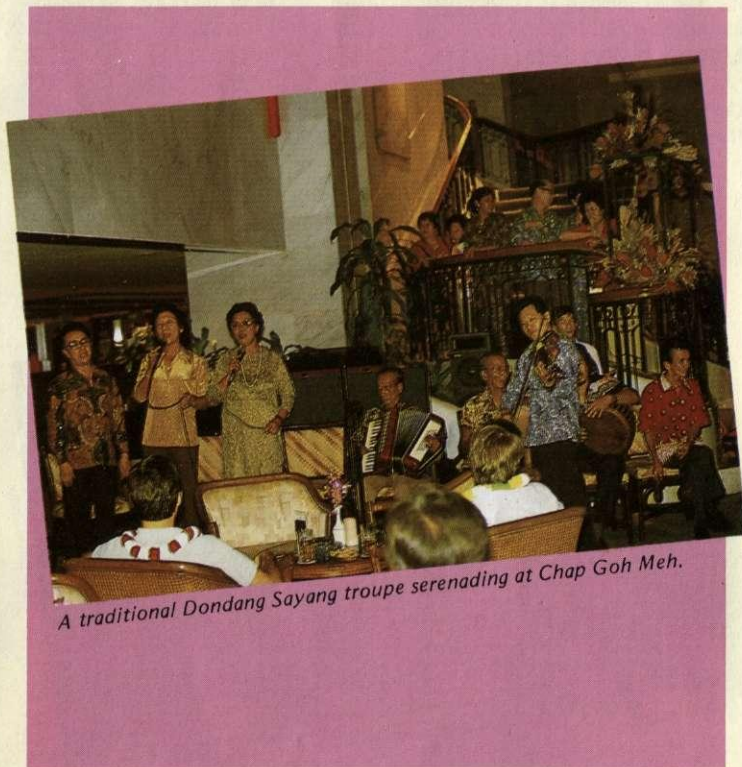
Celebrated on different days by the various Chinese communities; the Cantonese on the 13th day and the Hokkiens on the 14th and 15th days of Chinese New Year.

The highlights of the celebration is the "Cheh Hoay" ceremony on the 14th night at the deity's temple in Tanjung Tokong. A ritual is held at about 11.00 p.m. when the temple lights are switched off and joss-sticks are put into the deity's special urn where they are fanned until they burst out in flames. It is the customary belief that the intensity of the flames will foretell the prosperity of the New Year.

CHAP GOH MEH

Normally falls in the months of February or March

Celebrated on a grand scale mainly by the Hokkien community, with prayers and offerings on the 15th night of the Chinese New Year, which brings the New Year celebrations to a close. A popular tale is that during the old days, unmarried women used to go to Gurney Drive and the Esplanade to throw oranges into the sea in the hope that they will get good husbands.



A traditional Dondang Sayang troupe serenading at Chap Goh Meh.

EASTER SUNDAY

1st week of April

A joyous day for Christians as it signifies the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Churches celebrated the occasion by having services and some also have presentations of cantatas.

Most of the Tourist class hotels also join in the festivity with 'Easter' happenings and special sales of 'Easter Eggs'.

PENANG BRIDGE RUN

1st Sunday in April

Reported to be the largest running event in Penang and Malaysia, in terms of participation. The Penang Bridge Run was introduced in 1986.

The 21.2 km run attracts an interesting mix of more than 10,000 local and international enthusiasts. Opened to participants aged 12 onwards, this annual sporting event is held in April.

The attraction of the event lies not only in the challenge but also in the sheer thrill of running across the longest bridge in Asia. The Penang Bridge links Penang Island with Prai on the mainland and is also the third longest bridge of its kind in the world.

BIRTHDAY OF THE GODDESS OF MERCY (KUAN YIN)

Celebrated three times in the Chinese lunar calendar, they fall on the 19th days of the second, sixth and ninth moons. Devotees worship Kuan Yin or the Goddess of Mercy at the Goddess of Mercy Temple at Lebu Pitt. Puppet shows are staged in front of the temple.

The Kuan Yin enjoys a wide followers among Buddhists because of her compassion for the suffering of the people.

HINDU NEW YEAR

Usually falls in April

The Hindu New Year falls on the first day of the month of "SITTHIRAI". Special "pujas" (religious ceremonies) are held in homes and temples. The Hindu almanac is read out in temples.

HARI RAYA PUASA

This festival marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. It falls on the first day of Syawal, the 10th month of the Muslim calendar (Hijrah). Muslims usher the day by performing thanksgiving prayers in mosques and remembering departed loved ones. It is also a common practice for Muslims to hold "open house" for their relatives and friends.



New Straits Times

The visiting of friends and loved ones during an 'open house' at Hari Raya.



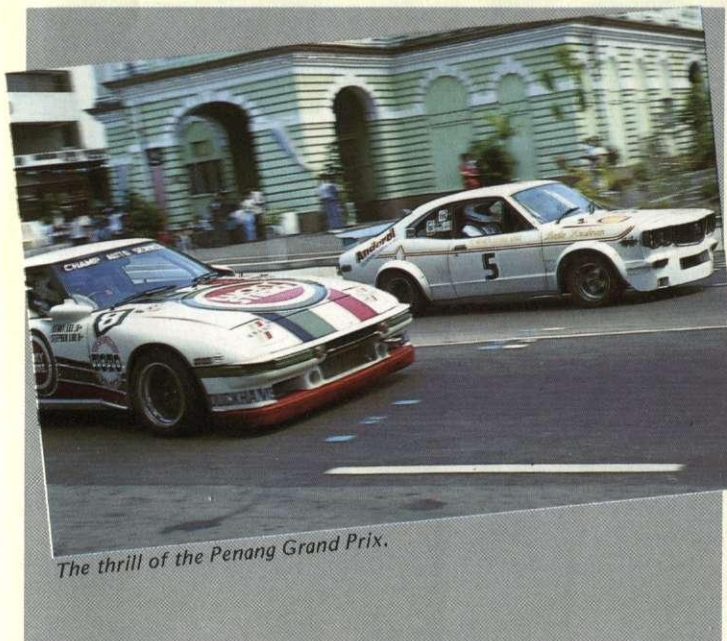
New Straits Times

The making of 'ketupat', a rice dish usually served with a curry.

PENANG GRAND PRIX

Usually in August

This is an annual event organised by Penang Motor Sports Club and sponsored by the Penang State Government. Racing along the only street circuit in Malaysia, it is a popular event with saloon cars and motorcycles. It draws a good participation from local and international racing enthusiasts.



Steven Lau

The thrill of the Penang Grand Prix.

WESAK DAY

Falls in May

The most important day in the Buddhist calendar, celebrated in commemoration of Buddha's birth, day of enlightenment and the achievement of Nirvana.

Celebrations begin before dawn and by early morning the temples are thronged with devotees offering incense, joss-sticks and prayers. Monks in saffron robes chant sutras (religious hymns) all day. The poor are provided with free meals, worshippers make donations and release birds from cages to gain merit.

In the evening, a procession of an illuminated statue of Buddha and other decorated floats pass through the main roads in town.



The float of the Buddha at Wesak Day.

CHUNG FESTIVAL (TUAN WU CHIEH)

Usually falls in June

A mid-year festival, celebrated on the 5th day of the 5th moon of the Chinese lunar calendar, also known as the Double Fifth Festival. It commemorates the death of the patriotic poet Chu Yuan, who drowned himself in protest against the evils of corruption.

In an attempt to save him, fishermen raced out, thrashing water and throwing in glutinous rice dumplings to prevent his body from being eaten by fishes.

Today the eating of this pyramid-shaped, steamed, glutinous rice dumpling ("Chung"), wrapped up in bamboo leaves, has become symbolic of this festival.



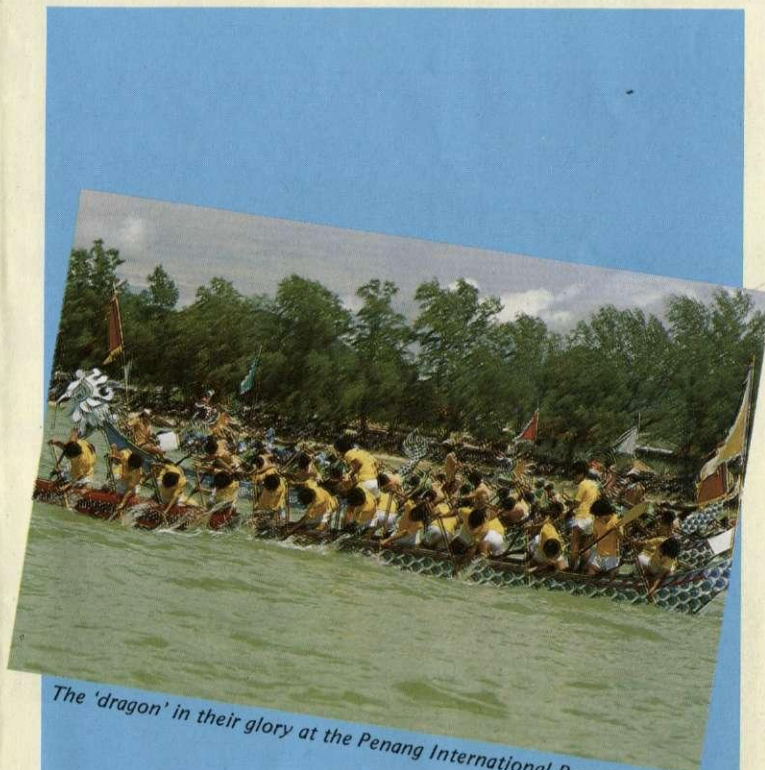
Rice dumplings are a part of the Chung Festival.

PENANG INTERNATIONAL BOAT FESTIVAL

Normally in June

This is a major event in the international sporting calendar on boat racing. It is an annual affair where local teams and top international rowers take part in this mid-year event held at Persiaran Gurney.

Boats almost 12 metres long, painted with scales and decorated with an awesome dragon's head and tail, fight for supremacy in a colourful regatta.



The 'dragon' in their glory at the Penang International Boat Festival.

HARI RAYA HAJI

Falls in July

A national public holiday.

A religious day for Muslims to mark the 10th day of "Zulhijjah", the 12th month of the Muslim calendar when pilgrims in Mecca visit the "Baitullah" (Black Stone) in the last phase of the "Haj" or pilgrimage.

Muslims perform prayers of thanksgiving in mosques and cattle are slaughtered and distributed to the needy.

Meanwhile, in true Malaysian spirit, 'open-houses' are held at Muslim homes for friends and relatives.

FEAST OF ST. ANNE

Last Sunday in July

An important event for Roman Catholics in Malaysia, thousands of Catholics and non-Catholics gather at the Church of St. Anne in Bukit Mertajam, Province Wellesley.

Service begins in the evening in a solemn High Mass followed by the blessing of the sick and a candle-light procession.



The St. Anne procession.

David Chew

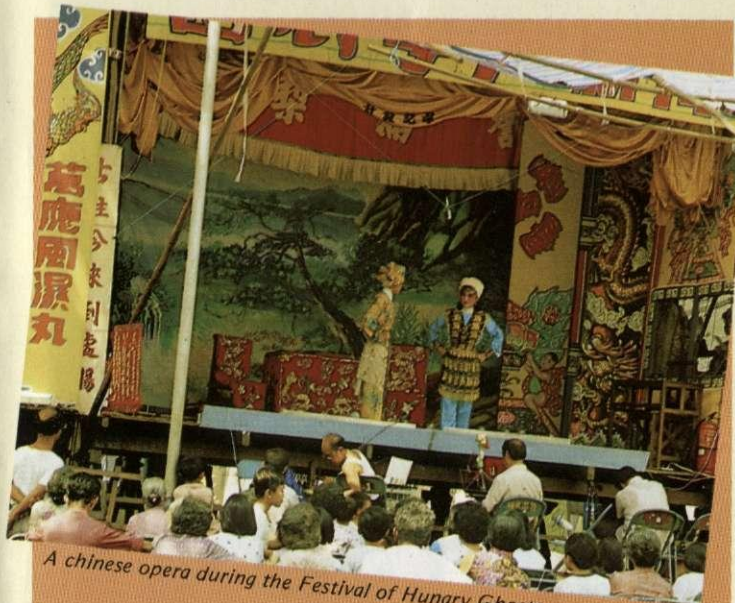
FESTIVAL OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

Falls in August

This is a month-long festival observed during the 7th month of the Chinese lunar calendar. The Chinese believe that during this month the souls of the dead are released from Hades to roam the realm of the living.

Sumptuous offerings of cooked food and fresh fruits, together with lit joss-sticks and candles are made, before the altars of paper effigies of the King of Hades and his two bodyguards.

Highlights of the festival are operas and stage shows at community centres and market places.



David Chew

MAAL HIJRAH

Usually falls in August

National public holiday.

This is the New Year's Day of the Islamic calendar, celebrated with religious discussions and lectures. The "Hijrah" commemorates the journey of the Prophet Muhammad from Medina to Mecca in 622 a.d.

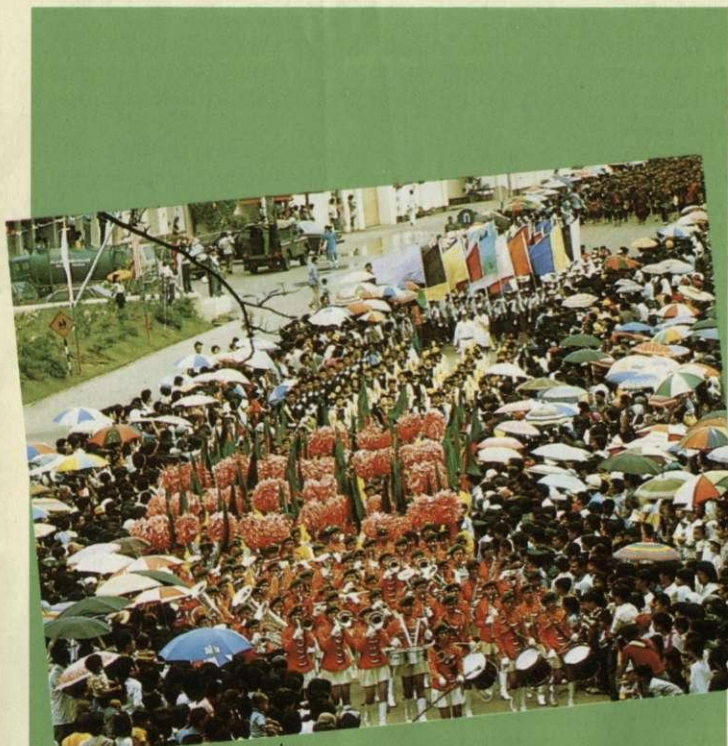
NATIONAL DAY

31st August

National public holiday.

A day of celebration for Malaysians as it commemorates the independence of the country.

The city is adorned with colourful decorations and brightly lit-up. Parades, colourfully decorated floats, exhibitions and stage shows are held in conjunction with this celebration.



The National Day parade.

New Straits Times

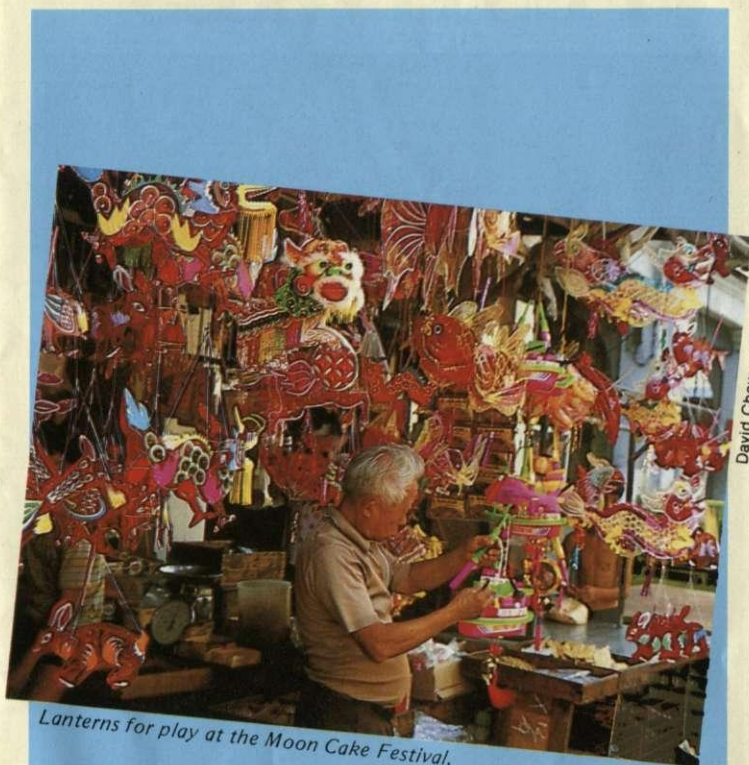
MOON CAKE FESTIVAL

Usually falls in September

This festival falls on the 15th day of the 8th Moon of the Chinese lunar calendar. It marks the overthrow of the tyrannical rule of the Mongol overlords in China.

It is celebrated with the exchange and eating of moon cakes while women pray to the Moon Goddess for the fullness of family life, vigour, youth and fertility.

A major highlight of the festival is the parading with candle-lit coloured paper lanterns by children.



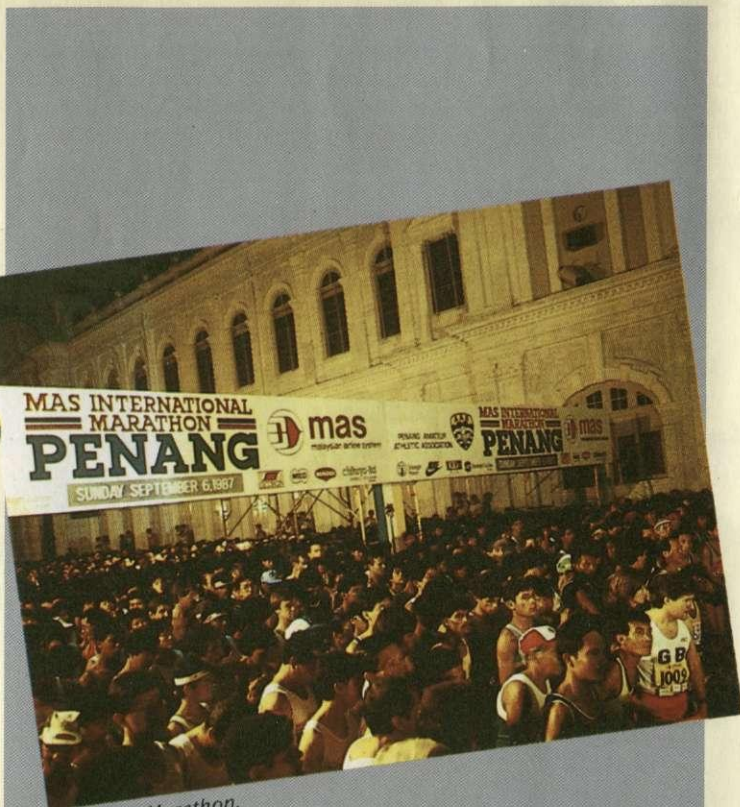
Lanterns for play at the Moon Cake Festival.

David Chew

MAS PENANG INTERNATIONAL MARATHON

September

Held annually on the first week of September, this Marathon is one of Penang's premier sports events. This event attracts a crowd of over 3,000 each year including top international runners.



The MAS Marathon.

FESTIVAL OF THE NINE EMPEROR GODS

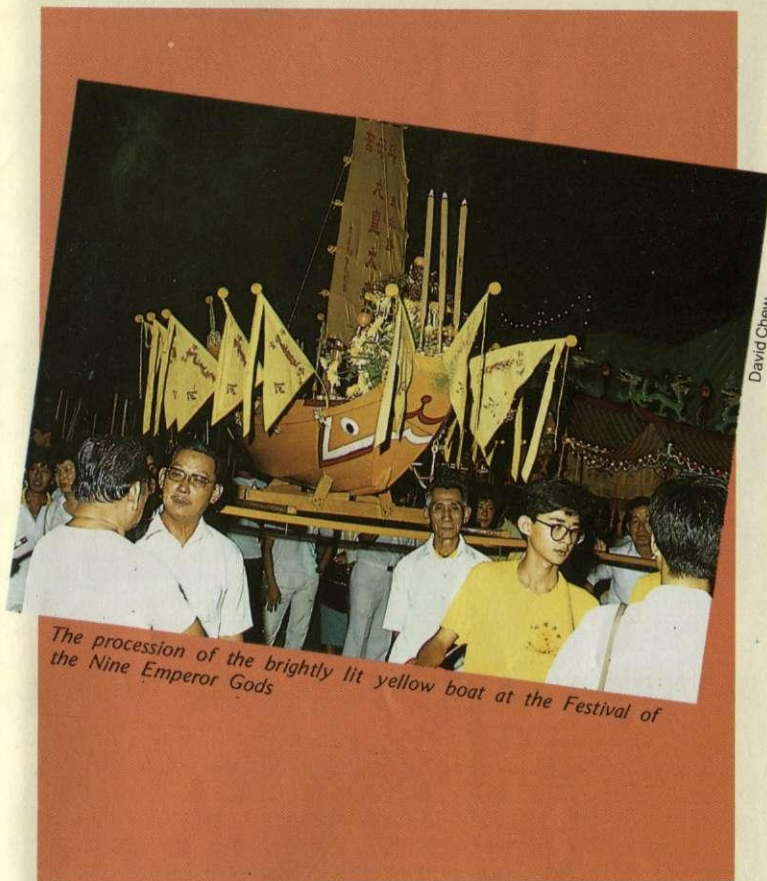
Usually falls in October

This festival falls on the 9th month of the Chinese lunar calendar. During this period nine days are taken up in prayers, Chinese operas and processions.

Devotees confine themselves to a vegetarian diet. On the 9th day a grand procession is held to commemorate the return of the Gods to heaven.

Devotees make a pilgrimage to the Kew Ong Yeah (Nine Emperor Gods) Temple of Paya Terubong Hill by climbing its 1,200 steps. A spectacular fire-walking ceremony is held in the evening outside the Chinese temples in Jalan Magazine and Jalan Noordin.

A procession sending off the spirit of the Emperor Gods, conveyed in a brightly lit yellow boat to the waterfront, marks the end of the Festival.



David Chew

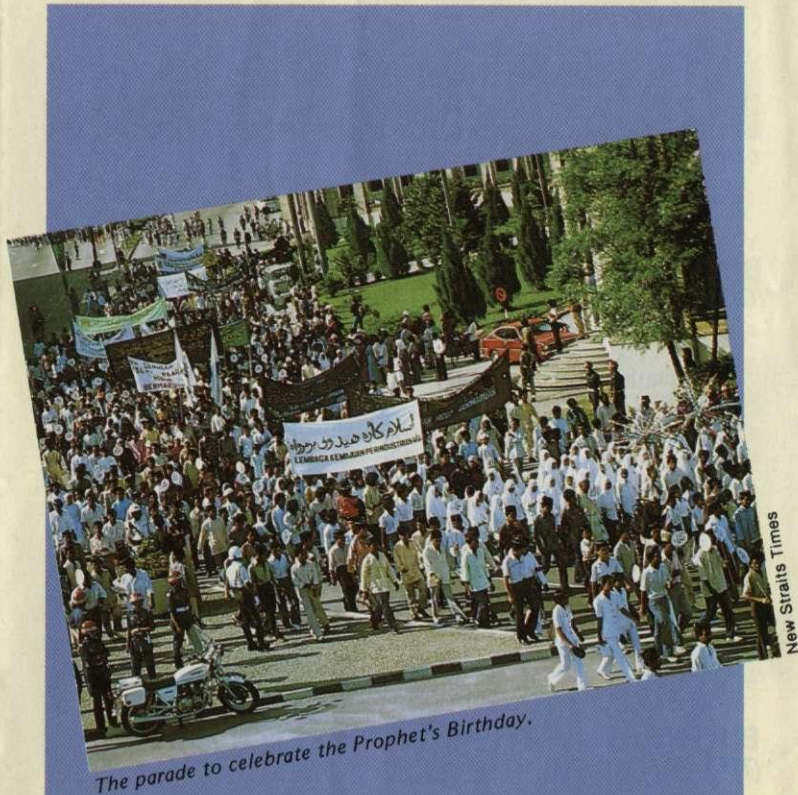
The procession of the brightly lit yellow boat at the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods

PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S BIRTHDAY

Normally falls in the months of October or November

National public holiday.

The Prophet's birthday is observed by Muslims from all walks of life. Muslims gather at the state mosque and recite hymns of praise to the Prophet. Religious teachers recite holy verses from the Koran and special prayers are held at the mosque followed by talks given by eminent Muslim scholars from overseas as well as from Malaysia.



The parade to celebrate the Prophet's Birthday.

New Straits Times

DEEPAVALI

Falls in November

Deepavali, otherwise known as "Festival of Lights" falls in the Hindu calendar month of "Aippasi" and is celebrated nationwide by the Hindu community.

According to Hindu scriptures, it marks the victory of Lord Krishna over the demon-king Narakausa. Another legend relates that Rama, the hero king of India and reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, was crowned king of Ayodya on this day after destroying the demon Ravana who had kidnapped his wife, Sita.

On his return to Ayodya, the people lined the streets to welcome Rama. In the night, they lit up the streets with oil lamps and celebrated the event.

On this auspicious day in our modern era, thanksgiving prayers are offered at home and at temples. Hindu homes are brightly decorated with tiny oil lamps to signify the triumph of light over darkness, good over evil, and wisdom over ignorance.



Deepavali - A Festival of Lights.

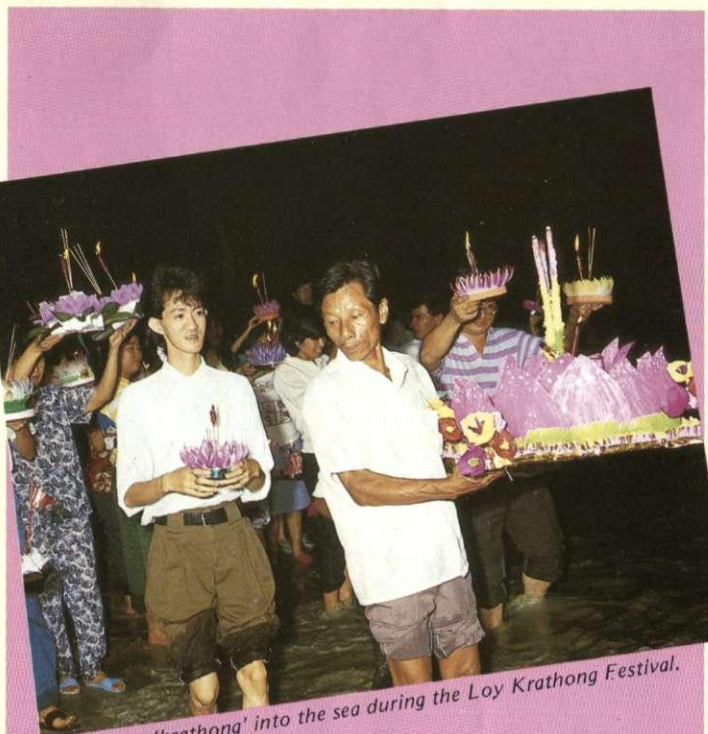
Tourist Development Corporation

FESTIVAL OF LOY KRATHONG

Normally falls in the months of December or January

A religious festival observed mainly by the Thai community in Penang, it falls on the full moon nights of the 11th and 12th lunar months. "Krathongs" (lotus-like blossoms made of banana leaves, carrying lit candles and joss-sticks) are carried in a procession, starting from the Thai Temples to the beach at Gurney Drive.

The "krathongs" are allowed to float out onto the sea in memory of the Lord Buddha's footprint on the banks of the Narmada river in Northern India.



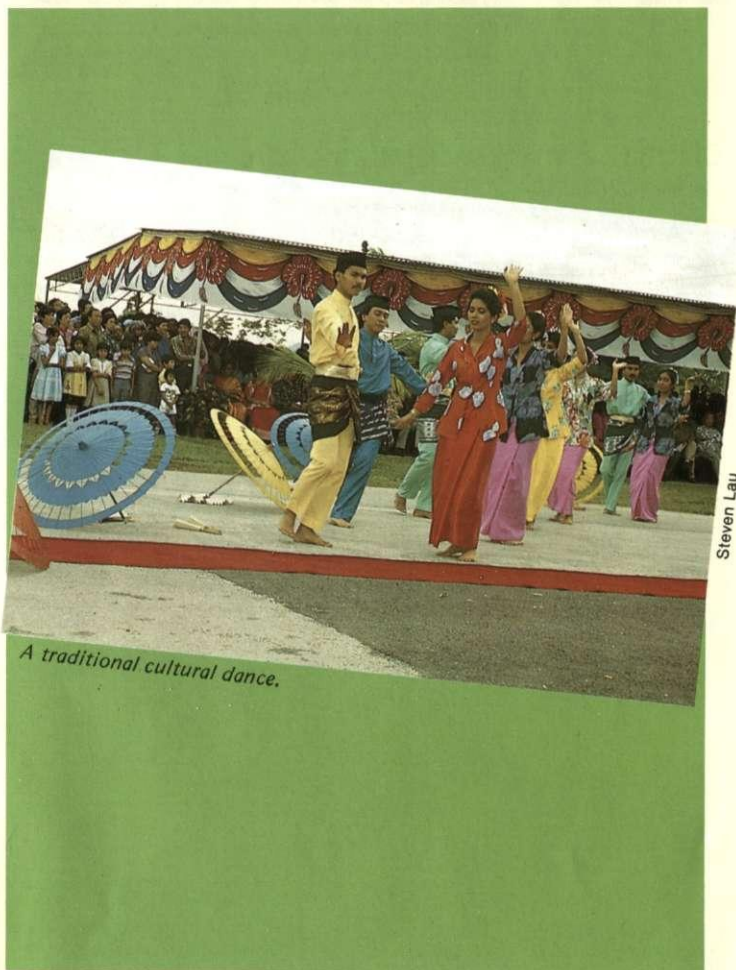
David Chew

Releasing a 'krathong' into the sea during the Loy Krathong Festival.

PENANG FESTIVAL (PESTA)

1st — 31st December

Held throughout the month of December, the Penang Festival provides visitors with some of the best aspects of cultural and recreational activities of the island. It highlights a trade and industrial fair, decorated floats, cultural and variety shows, beauty contests, water carnivals and sporting events. In conjunction with the festival, a "Chingay" procession is held. "Chingay" is the acrobatic balancing of huge, triangular multi-coloured flags hitched on to 10 metre-long poles, on the performer's lower jaws, foreheads and shoulders.



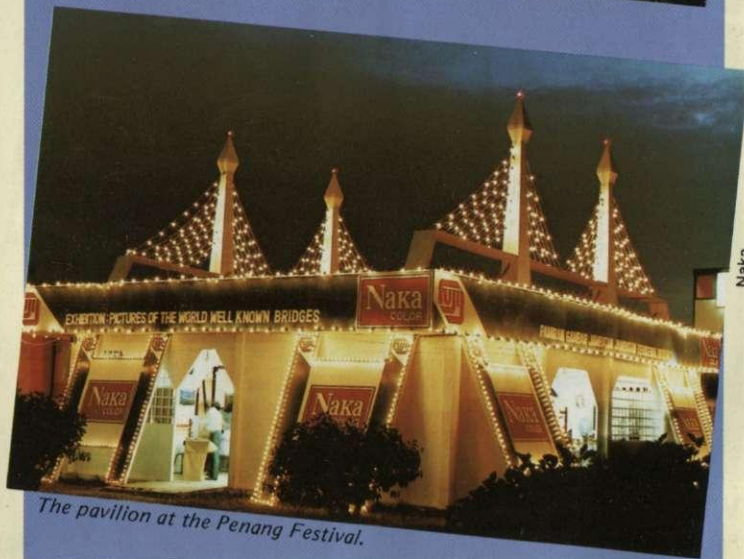
Steven Lau

A traditional cultural dance.



Steven Lau

Floats gaily decorated.



Naka

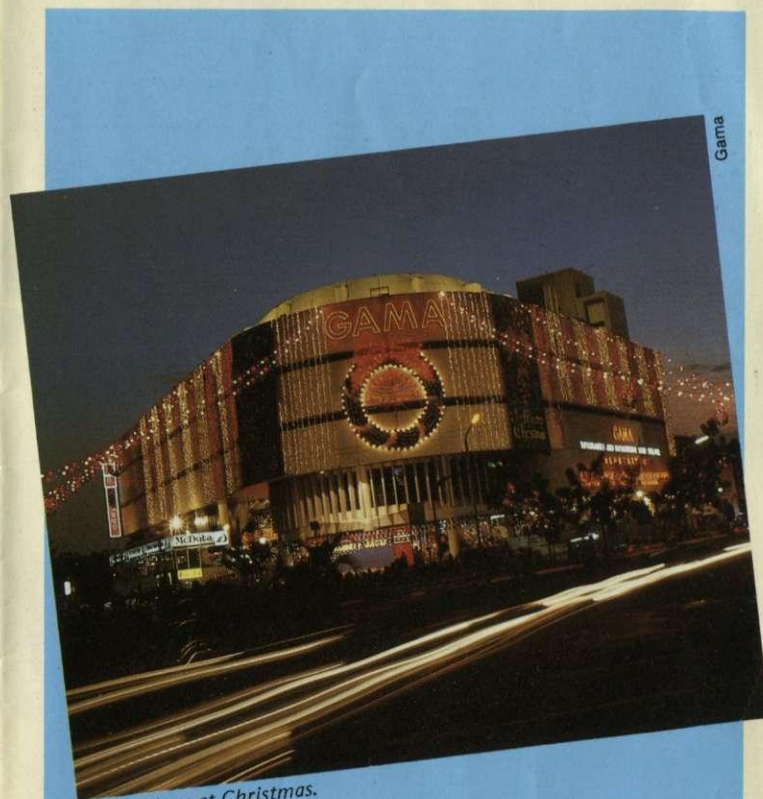
The pavilion at the Penang Festival.

CHRISTMAS

25th December

National public holiday.

Midnight services are held at all Christian Churches on Christmas eve. The shopping centres, hotels, old folks and children's homes echo with beautiful carols sung by carolers. The revelry and yuletide spirit of Christmas is enjoyed by Christians and non-Christians alike.



Gama

Decorations at Christmas.

STARWALK

December

First held in 1978, this event which is organised by Star newspaper, has become an annual fixture on Penang's calendar of sporting events.

Held each December to coincide with the school holidays and the month-long Pesta Pulau Pinang (Penang Festival), it attracts an average of 10,000 participants from Malaysia and Singapore.